

A Sojourner's Walk

by Joan Shaffer



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Acknowledgements

To My Beloved Bobby

Next to Jesus, you are the best thing that ever happened to me. Our love for the Lord and our love for each other has sustained us through the joys and sorrows of life. I love you more than I ever thought it possible to love another; and I thank God for your enduring friendship and abiding love. Your support and belief in me has given me the courage to step out in ways that I considered daunting and unachievable. Thank you for helping me to be my best self. “You are mine and I am yours” (Song of Songs 2:16).

To My Children

To our son Zachary and daughter-in-law Sarah and our daughter Kelley and son-in-law Jay, and our friend who has been like a daughter, Angela, and her husband Dirk. My love for each of you is inexpressible. Although your contributions to this world have already been noteworthy, what brings me the greatest joy is that you are “walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us” (2 John 1:4) and that you are raising your own precious children, our beloved grandchildren, in homes where Christ is preeminent as the cornerstone of your families. I encourage you to continue to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us by faithfully fixing your eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1).

Know that your relentless reassurance and persistence encouraging me to pursue my passion for writing about the love of God has been the inspiration for this devotional. Thank you for your unwavering love and continual support.

To My Beloved Sister

To my sister Cindy. Tete’ you are my longest loved family and friend. I’ve walked more years on this earth with you

than any other living soul and you have a piece of my heart no one else will ever have. Through our shared history, we developed a bond of caring, protection and dedication that has not diminished over time. We have experienced the fulfillment of Romans 12:10, “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” You are deeply loved and treasured.

To My Cousin

A heartfelt thank you goes to my cousin, Mike Mitseff. Thank you for the hours of sacrificial labor you’ve invested to edit, layout and prepare this devotion for publication. This book would have never come to life without your love and commitment. I can only pray that God will bless you commensurate to the blessing you have been to me and many others who have been recipients of your love and generosity. “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38 KJV). I love you, MikeE!

Too Many To Name

There are many individuals who have not been mentioned by name who are no less worthy of acknowledgement. To my prayer partners and life-long friends and family who have deposited rich investments into my life, I thank you. I won’t attempt to list you by name for fear of omitting one who is dearly loved, but you know who you are and “I thank God for you every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3). By faith, we have sojourned in the land of promise as we await our rich inheritance (Hebrews 11:9).

DEVOTIONS

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made Psalm 139:14.....	4	True and Proper Worship I Corinthians 4:7.....	36
The Forever Crown I Corinthians 9:25.....	6	I AM The Way John 14:6.....	38
Willing and Obedient Isaiah 1:18,19.....	8	Bless Your Children With God's Truth Lamentations 4:18.....	40
Peace of God Isaiah 26:3.....	10	The Faithfulness of God Lamentations 3:22,23.....	42
To Those Who Are Perishing . . . Foolishness I Corinthians 1:18.....	12	Be Still And Know That I AM God Luke 8:24.....	44
Spiritual Warfare I Peter 5:8.....	14	Mary Was Not Distracted Luke 10:40.....	46
Praying Parents I Samuel 1:27.....	16	He is Risen! Luke 24:45.....	48
The Gift of Another Day II Samuel 7:18.....	18	God 'Sightings' Philippians 2:13.....	50
May Our Children Walk in Truth III John 1:4.....	20	The Everlasting Child Proverbs 23:25.....	52
A Life Transformed Acts 4:13.....	22	Thirty-nine Years of Marriage Psalm 16:6.....	54
There is a Season Ecclesiastes 3:1.....	24	God's Path: The Way The Truth and The Life Psalm 16:11.....	56
Life is Fleeting Seek God Ecclesiastes 11:8.....	26	From Fear to Love Psalm 18:33.....	58
God Shaped Vacuum Ephesians 2:8,9.....	28	The Voice of a Child Psalm 116:1.....	60
My Peace I Leave You Galatians 5:15.....	30	Lovelocks Psalm 136:2.....	62
Our Soul's Anchor Hebrews 6:19,20.....	32	Easter Morning at Red Rocks Revelation 4:10,11.....	64
Pride, Arrogance, and Conceit John 1:10.....	34		



Psalm 139:14

*“I praise you because
I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are
wonderful, I know
that full well.”*

*H*e arrived fresh from God. After years of prayer, he made his grand entrance into the room, into our lives and ever into our hearts. His long awaited arrival was met with joy, laughter, tears and awe — so enmeshed were the raw emotions as to be indistinguishable one from the other.

He will be taught to love God with all his heart, all his soul and all his strength. He will be cradled to sleep with hymns of praise and adoration for the God that knit him together in his mother’s womb. He will be prayed for by loving family and consecrated to the One who gave him breath.

He will grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and be taught of the sacrifice that Christ made in order that he should live. He will be taught how to live and how to love with an eternal perspective. He will be urged to offer his body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, his spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1).

He will be surrounded by others that will encourage him to live his life to the fullest, giving his best for the Gospel

and leaving a legacy of faithfulness and surrender to God and to His will. He will sing with arms opened wide and heart abandoned at the goodness only God can give.

He will leave a footprint as to his comings and goings. His footprint will be like a map to the heart of God. His steadfast spirit will serve as an inspiration for others to follow as he purposefully and intentionally charts his course toward heaven’s home. He will, for the goal set before him, endure his cross and drink his bitter cup encouraging others to follow his example. And at last, when the lover of his soul calls him home, he will make another grand entrance and be greeted warmly and lovingly, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Father God, our hearts are full today from the boundless blessings we enjoy at your hand. Thank you for the unspeakable gift of life. We praise you for our children — for from You and through You and to You are all things. We worship you today and always with unceasing praise and adoration. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

(Psalm 139:14)

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

How would people define your legacy?

Where are you leading people? Will they be better people for having known you?

Are you conforming to the pattern of this world or are you being transformed by the renewing of your mind?
Pray that God will reveal all that hinders you from knowing His good, pleasing and perfect will.



1 Corinthians 9:25
“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”

During an early morning walk on the beach, football players in training were observed. These young men were improving their athletic ability and body coordination with plyometric and conditioning drills. The training was intended to improve their footwork and quickness. Athletes understand that speed and agility are two skills that are essential for success. These young men sacrifice sleep, comfort and ease in order to hone their skills and condition their bodies.

1 Timothy 4:7 instructs God’s children, “Train yourself to be godly.” Hebrews 5:14 reads, “But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

Strict training and consistency enable God’s children to distinguish good from evil. Strict training translates into making choices that are not popular, saying “no” when many others are saying “yes” and sacrificing today to receive tomorrow “a crown that will last forever.” What seems easy to do in theory is difficult in practice.

Strict training is not about immediate gratification. It is about doing the right thing moment by moment, day after day, month after month. The training is revealed in the choices we make, the investment of our time and limited energy. Most of us, sadly, are engaging in activities that will earn us a crown that will not last.

We often succumb to desirable and time consuming pursuits that are devoid of eternal value. A quote by Francis Chan wisely states, “Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at things in life that don’t really matter.” What am I striving for? Does it really matter? Am I pursuing accomplishments that will reap an eternal reward and a crown that will last forever?

We have been given the profound gift of life. Ephesians 2:10 reads, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Have I trained in such a way as to be able to know God’s will for my life? Has strict training conditioned me to the degree that I hear God’s voice and follow His promptings and do the

good works that He prepared in advance for me to do?

May today be the day we relinquish all that hinders our intentional walk with God and begin the strict training necessary to earn the crown that will last forever. Strict training begins with knowing God, consistently spending time with Him in His Word and having intimate conversations with Him about the abundant life that He has planned for us to enjoy.

“Father God, I surrender my life afresh to you today. Lord, I surrender my time, my talent and my treasure. It is the desire of my heart that I accomplish the works that you prepared in advance for me to do. May your faithfulness guide my seeking heart to the center of your perfect will and may my life be used for Kingdom purposes. Lead me away from pursuits that have no eternal value and enable me to know your heart, hear your voice and fulfill your calling on my life. In the name of Christ, our Lord. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 Corinthians 9:25

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”

When is the best time of day for you to study your Bible?

Where is the best place in your environment to study your Bible?

What keeps you from being in God’s word on a consistent basis? What do you need to change to meet with God regularly?



Isaiah 1:18 & 19

“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.”

The pronouncement was made with authority. His statement was clear, leaving no room for doubt, debate or discussion. His matter-of-fact approach in wanting to set the record straight clarifies the conversation about man’s sinfulness and his inability to shed the curse of his humanity. Jesus spoke, the matter was put to rest, or was it?

David not only understood the need for spiritual cleansing, but yearned for God’s healing touch on his life. Psalm 51:7 was penned as a result of David’s brokenness and repentance over his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. His heart cried out to God, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

The prophet Jeremiah affirmed that a sin nature exists in everyone born of human parents. He wrote, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

Reinhold Niebuhr believed the reality of a sin nature was so evident that he boldly stated, “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”

As a professional, it is difficult to observe persons who have “not settled the matter” of their spiritual condition. Their inability to see themselves as sin-scarred human beings needful of a spiritual cleansing hinders their ability to appropriate divine healing. It is difficult for these individuals to maintain consistent and long-term victory over behaviors that sabotage the spiritually abundant life we were intended to enjoy (John 10:10).

Their most sincere and concerted efforts, noble though they are, can only result in intermittent outward compliance. Over time, self-sins cannot be restrained and some of those sins, self-love, self-pity, self-reliance, self-righteousness and self-aggrandizement, reveal themselves as intrinsic to the corrupt nature.

It is only when the Divine nature is permitted preeminence in the human heart, can victory over thought, word and deed be consistently exhibited in a surrendered life.

Jesus promises to eradicate the scarlet sins of the yielded heart, cleansing them white as snow. His contingency in this transaction is our willingness and obedience. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and

righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The promise of forgiveness brings hope and healing to the newly surrendered in Christ while reassuring the redeemed that confession and forgiveness will be an ongoing experience throughout their spiritual journey.

The freshly fallen snow persistently serves as a reminder of God’s goodness. When the crisp white powder lay heavy as a blanket over the darkened terrain of our landscape, the visual cue prompts us to think of Christ. God’s gift to humanity, the grace that saves, redeems and bids the hungry soul to “settle the matter” and come, “eat the good things of the land.”

Dear Father, that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit (John 3:6). For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53). For you have clothed us with garments of salvation and arrayed us in a robe of your righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). We love and adore you, O Lord, our God. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Isaiah 1:18 &19

“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.”

“Self-sins” reside within us all. Which of the following “self-sins” do you struggle with: self-righteousness, self-pity, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-admiration, self-love, self-promotion and self-aggrandizement?

When was the last time you confessed your sins to God, asked for forgiveness and trusted Him to free you to live only for Jesus and His glory?

If you know someone struggling with a “self-sin,” instead of criticizing them, pray that they will experience God’s Divine nature in this area of their life.



Isaiah 26:3

*"You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you."*

There are times when life becomes overwhelming, times that remind us of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." During such periods, I cannot be comforted nor consoled by any other than the Wonderful Counselor. Only He can calm the agony of my heart.

I find my way to the lake, my quiet place, and sit alone and look at God's creation before me. The water, silent and smooth, a picture of tranquility. I am drawn here because the serenity of the lake soothes me, it is a salve to my anxious and troubled soul. In my solitude I cry to God out of the depths of my drought, "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1).

Captivated by the scene, I am reminded of God's sovereignty as I watch the setting sun. "He made the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down" (Psalm 104:19). The God that controls the sun and the moon is the same God that controls the vicissitudes of my life.

This omniscient God knows and understands my brokenness. "Come to

me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

I come before the throne of God, the words flowing out of the depths of my distress, they are raw, unrestrained and uncensored. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

The cords that tether me to my sorrow are severed through prayer. The comfort provided by family and friends is blessed indeed, but as precious as these tender mercies are, they cannot provide the divine solace that comes from God alone. Jesus understood this, as God's Word reveals: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16).

Although the circumstances that brought me low remained unchanged, there came a deep sense of rest and resolve. As I placed the uncontrollable concerns into the hands of God, peace began to flood my soul. Knowing that my burden was not mine to carry alone, I felt relieved, renewed and hopeful. "In my distress I called to the Lord; I called out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry

came to his ears" (2 Samuel 22:7).

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

During those occasions when overcome by diverse trials and tribulations, we find that we are deeply comforted simply by the sight of a loved one or by hearing their familiar voice. How much more then are we comforted by our "Abba" Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, our strength and our shield. Our Lord is mighty in power and his understanding limitless and he deals with us like a father deals with his children (Psalm 147:5). We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield (Psalm 33:20).

Father God, Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:25,26). Lord, may we ever remember that you are able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us (Ephesians 3:20). So great is your unfailing love. In Christ's name. Amen.

Isaiah 26:3
“You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.”

What situations and/or circumstances are most likely to rob you of God’s perfect peace?

Who is the first person you go to when you are distressed?

Challenge yourself to intentionally approach God during your next anxiety-provoking experience, resisting the temptation to elicit help from others instead of seeking out the comfort and care of the Wonderful Counselor.



1 Corinthians 1:18

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Life is filled with countless choices, some mindless and mechanical, some thoughtful and intentional. Regardless, each choice places us on a path that alters our life and affects our eternal future. Stephen R. Covey wrote, “We are free to choose our actions, but we are not free to choose the consequences of these actions.”

As we read the narrative of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, we are provided with an opportunity to observe two men who make significantly different choices and the consequences of their choices. Luke 23:32-33 reads, “Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals — one on his right, the other on his left.”

As the scene plays out, we read in Luke 23:35 that one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Jesus. “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” This man had a choice to make. He could believe Jesus to be the Messiah that He was, or he could deny Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

Prideful to the end, this thief arrogantly and willfully chose to deny the sovereignty, authority and the power of Jesus Christ, as was his right and privilege. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The second thief had a significantly different response and the consequences of his choice placed him on a distinctly different path. Luke 23:40-43 reads, “But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’

Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” Repentance of the second thief brought an unexpected gift. “But to us who are being saved it (the cross) is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Two criminals are each faced with a choice and the unalterable consequences of their choices. One chose to deny Christ and, in so doing,

eternally separated himself from God. The second man, with heart surrendered, receives grace as he is mercifully and utterly snatched from Satan’s grasp.

Father God, your word tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We acknowledge that Jesus Christ is your only provision for our sin and that you demonstrated your own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

We are grateful that you have provided us the opportunity to receive Christ through personal invitation. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:1-8). As we receive Jesus by faith, as an act of the will, we rejoice that you take away our sin, dress us in fine garments and place a clean turban on our head.

We are humbled to be clothed in the spotless robe of Christ’s righteousness. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:26). In Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:18

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

If you haven't accepted Christ's death on the cross as the forgiveness of your sins, pray this prayer: “Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.”

What will you do to become involved with God's family in order to grow in your faith?

How will you measure your growth to insure you are moving forward in your new/continuous walk with Christ?



1 Peter 5:8

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

It's not uncommon to walk the shoreline and hear gulls squawking to each other. Gulls are reportedly resourceful, inquisitive and intelligent birds, demonstrating complex methods of communication and a highly developed social structure. Most gulls are carnivores, taking live food and scavenging opportunistically.

A comparison could be made between the highly-visible predatory gull and the less conspicuous predacious devil. As the colonies of gulls display their meat-eating behavior, so too does the devil reveal his destructive nature as he enlists the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil to thwart the plans of God and malign His children. Satan and his minions are resourceful and capable of executing strategies designed “to steal, kill and destroy” (John 10:10). He is a formidable foe.

In 1 Peter 5:8 God's word instructs us, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for

someone to devour.” Busied by the frenzy of life, we live in denial of this truth and lose sight of the fact that we are engaged in a deadly spiritual battle with the devil. As we begin to pray for spiritual wisdom and understanding, God enables us to see the warfare that surrounds us.

Finally, our eyes are awakened to the reality of the pervasive presence of evil, and the wise Christian surrenders self-sufficiency and bravado for dependence and humility, entrusting his life into his Father's hands. It is in this state of awareness that our Father's character is revealed and we see Him intervening on our behalf in ways that often defy logic. Only then can we confidently proclaim, “Sovereign Lord, My strong deliverer, you shield my head in the day of battle” (Psalm 140:7).

Spiritual warfare is real, whether we acknowledge it or not. God's Word tells us, “The secret power of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). God instructs us to be vigilant and prepared for battle

while encouraging us that we are already equipped for combat. Second Corinthians 10:4 reminds us, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” We need to persevere so that when we have done the will of God we will receive what he has promised. “We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved” (Hebrews 10:36, 39).

Heavenly Father, may the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever (Hebrews 13:20). In Christ's name. Amen.

1 Peter 5:8

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

Ephesian 6:10-20 is a metaphor for the steps we need to take to prepare for spiritual warfare. When was the last time you lost sight of the battle against our adversary, Satan the devil, and his host of demons?

How is having the character of God synonymous with wearing the armor of God?

Think of a time that God's divine power defeated a stronghold in your life and praise Him for it.



Photo by Paula Kuzman

1 Samuel 1:27

"I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him."

The day was upon them. The much anticipated confirmation was received with joy and thankful adoration. God in His infinite mercy had graced them with life within. "You're pregnant." The words resounded in their hearts and they were warmed as they marveled at the child that would now capture their hearts and enrich their lives. They prayed for this child and thanked God for His precious gift.

Excitedly they entered the obstetrician's office for the long awaited ultrasound. It was the twentieth week of pregnancy and this day would reveal their child's gender. The words, "It's a girl," were quickly followed with words of concern. Cautiously, the couple was informed that their baby's femur bones were bowed. The weeks following were spent consulting specialists and submitting to countless tests. As each report brought increasingly unfavorable speculation, the couple prayed, entrusting their child to God.

The weeks were filled with conflicting emotions. Their hearts wanted to believe God would spare the life of the daughter they longed for, yet the collective opinion of the multitude of specialists was that the child would not survive outside of the womb. The

baby shower was cancelled. It seemed agonizing to have friends and family bring gifts to a mother whose baby was given little chance for survival.

While the baby's active movements could be felt and observed by her devoted parents, they were simultaneously being instructed to plan for a funeral.

How can one plan for the funeral of one's child, while the child is dancing with abandon in the sanctity of mother's protective hollow. They prayed through the Spirit in Jesus' name to their heavenly Father, relinquishing the child to the One they loved.

They gave her back to God. Through tears, with outstretched arms and surrendered wills, they released her, asking only for God's will to be done. They responded with the same heart attitude as Abraham, who when tested, faithfully surrendered his beloved son Isaac into the hands of God. Likewise, they surrendered the object of their affection to the One they loved above all else.

The expectant parents entered the delivery room with the peace of God that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

The medical teams anticipating the child would not survive outside of the mother's womb, prepared to administer comfort care to the infant until she breathed her last. The hospital waiting room was filled with

friends and family prayerfully interceding through the night and early morning hours. At last, she entered the world. Her labored breathing began improving with each rising of her chest. Her strong arms extended and straight legs flexed as she adapted to her new environment.

With eyes wide open and her mouth filled with sound, Elliana announced her arrival. Her name in Hebrew, chosen long before the foreboding assertions of the specialists means, "God has answered."

The poignancy of her name was not lost on the faithful, who in humility and praise worshipped God with gratitude and thanksgiving for this indescribable gift. For twenty weeks, the specialists pithily reported the ominous discoveries in the tests. But now, as the sun rose in the morning sky, they were silenced.

The vibrant, thriving child before them, void of defect or infirmity, defied explanation. God answered and Elliana is forever a witness to His sovereignty.

Father God, we bow at your supremacy. We acknowledge that in your hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind (Job 12:10). Our heart's desire is to praise you at all times. Teach us to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests, reverently trusting you as Lord and Savior. Jesus, we praise your Holy name. Amen.

1 Samuel 1:27

“I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.”

What is your “natural” response when God seems to be far away during the difficult times of your life?

What do you do with your anger, disappointment and confusion when life turns out differently than you had planned, when your miracle doesn’t happen?

How do you find your way back to God after you’ve distanced yourself from him?



2 Samuel 7:18

“Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and he said: ‘Who am I, Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?’”

Family. “You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.” “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.” Quotes about family relationships are plentiful. The topic of family life has the capacity to evoke emotions unlike any other subject. Whether these early relationships are viewed as healthy or dysfunctional, we are all influenced — to some degree — by the persons we define as family.

My sister, my only sibling, is younger by two years and 10 days. All of our extended family members have passed; she is the only link to my childhood. Our shared history enabled us to experience the most formative years of our lives together. We understand each other today because we were witnesses to each other’s yesterdays. We remember the joys and sorrows, the good and bad and everything in between though unaware of the long shadows that were being cast into our future.

Our relationship runs deep. Although we have distinct personalities and diverse interests, we have a unity of soul. We are authentic with one another, transparent and candid in our conversations.

We have come to accept that there are times when we agree to disagree, accepting one another as we are. We

have perfected the art of protecting one another, a skill acquired as a result of the many hardships endured through those seminal years.

As our parents were physically infirmed, childhood was not a luxury permitted to us. The bond formed through the years of desperation and survival will neither permit us to abandon nor renounce our love and care for one another.

It’s been said that you don’t know what you have until it’s gone. It wasn’t until a life-threatening illness silenced my sister for nearly one week that I was able to begin to comprehend the degree to which I would miss her should she not survive.

She has many gifts, but one very special gift is that she is the historian of our lives, remembering and recounting our family life with ease. As she lay silent in the hospital bed, I felt as though my past had lost its voice. She always has a way of reflecting on what our parents would do in any given situation, keeping their memory alive in a way that I was unable to do.

My sister has always been a presence in my life. She was the maid of honor at my wedding, the godmother to our children and the great aunt to the grandchildren.

Unmarried and childless, I happily and generously shared my family with

her, enabling her to love and be loved in a way that she had always wanted but was unable to experience through a family of her own. “God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6).

As she lay silent on her hospital bed, I understood that my sister might not survive to share our joy and I knew that life’s cherished events would be forever changed without her there to enjoy them with me.

When my sister survived her critical illness, my heart was full of gratitude and I rejoiced that God had given us yet another day to love one another.

As my sister has ministered to her family and friends through countless selfless gestures, many who have been recipients of her thoughtfulness are now rejoicing at her recovery. “Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy” (Luke 1:58).

Father God, I want to thank you for your grace; you have given us what we do not deserve. You have shown tender kindness in sparing the life of my beloved sister. We rest and trust you with all of our days, taking comfort in your Word. ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’ (Jeremiah 29:12). In Jesus’ name, we pray, with thanksgiving. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:18

“Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and he said:
‘Who am I, Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?’”

Who has been your spiritual mentor? Praise God for their influence on your life.

Whom have you affected and encouraged in their walk with God? Praise God for using you in this way.



3 John 1:4

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

We prayed for our children as infants. The prayers flowed out of us like rushing water continuously bubbling up from the depths of our souls. We questioned our capacity to endure the rigors of parenthood: sleepless nights, continuous feedings and mounds of diapers. We marveled that they survived to their first birthday despite our inadequacies and ignorance and we praised God for His grace to see us through these challenging, but oh so charming, days. "Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray" (Psalm 5:2).

We prayed for them as toddlers. We were convinced that an entourage of angels had been assigned to each of our children while they learned to walk and run. There is no other rationale for the "near misses," those "could have been serious" trips and falls that accompanied their playful antics and fearless capers. "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:1).

We prayed for them as they started school. We asked the Lord to help them choose their friends wisely, develop a passion for learning and reveal their God-given gifts. We knew that they would be developing habits

in grade school that would have ripple effects into their future and we prayed them through each developmental milestone. "You, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him. So your servant has found courage to pray to you" (1 Chronicles 17:25).

We prayed for them through their teen years. Those adolescent years have the ability to derail even the most committed of personalities. Developing bodies, fluctuating hormones, and incipient insecurities represent only a few of the challenges that our children face during these capricious years. It is in these days that peer relationships overcome common sense and the desire to belong can tempt one to renounce all that he or she once held dear. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

We prayed for them through their young adult years. We prayed that they would know and understand the love of God and His purpose for their life. We desired that they walk in truth (3 John 1:4) and we trusted that the foundation that was laid in their youth would come to fruition.

"Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb! Listen, my son, the answer to

my prayers!" (Proverbs 31:2). We knew our days of influence were mostly behind us and our adult children would begin their unique journey into the world. We prayed that they would choose Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life" to chart their course (John 14:6). And our grateful hearts rejoiced when our adult children and their spouses proclaimed, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Father, we come to you to pray and intercede on behalf of our grandchildren, by faith, we thank you for their salvation. With all wisdom and understanding, may you make known to them the mystery of your will according to your good pleasure, which you purposed in Christ (Ephesians 1:9). May you make firm their steps as they delight in you (Psalm 37:23). May Christ, by his Spirit, guide each of our grandchildren into all truth, and lead them in the way of righteousness as they walk after the Spirit (Proverbs 8:20). May the Lord direct their hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance (2 Thessalonians 3:5). Please keep them safe from the traps set by evildoers, from the snares laid for them (Psalm 141:9). In Jesus' name. Amen.

3 John 1:4

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

Have your prayers for another changed his or her life? If so, how?

Do you continue to pray even when you don't perceive God answering your prayers?

Read Hebrews 11:39. What set these individuals apart? Pray that God would increase your faith and enable you to remain faithful even if you have yet to receive what He promised.



Acts 4:13

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”

Located in the charming resort of Mackinac Island, Michigan, is the Seabiscuit Café. Regrettably, our brief time on the island prevented us from enjoying a meal at this local eatery. The restaurant features an appropriate horse theme from the 1938 true story of the famous Thoroughbred racehorse, Seabiscuit. The release of the movie version of Seabiscuit runs continuously on one of the restaurant’s four televisions.

As I read the sign outside the café, I was reminded of the 2003 movie. This movie had the capacity to touch hearts in a very profound way as it depicted the life of the unlikely champion racehorse, which became a symbol of hope to many Americans during the Great Depression. Captivated viewers watched Seabiscuit, an improbable victor, rise to fame in this poignant and inspiring film. The undersized Thoroughbred was not considered champion material, but paired with an unorthodox trainer and a troubled jockey, Seabiscuit excelled against all odds.

This story evoked deep emotions as it reminds us of ourselves. Seabiscuit was not extraordinary by most standards, considered undersized

and lazy he had unrealized potential. Had it not been for others who identified his strengths and understood his nature, his untapped possibilities may never have been realized and he might not have moved beyond his perceived limitations to become the champion that he was.

For many of us our lives began in the most ordinary of ways. There was nothing about us that was indicative of promise or substance. Some of us entered the arena of life with impediments and constraints that were difficult to overcome. It is reported that Seabiscuit was “never in the running,” but he forged ahead and in 1937 he won 11 of his 15 races and was the year’s leading money winner in the United States.

And so it is with those of us who have met and walked with Jesus Christ. While encouraging His disciples in Matthew 10, Jesus reminds these seemingly ordinary men that their lives are precious and extraordinary and that God’s providence extends itself to all creatures. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more

than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:28-31). An ordinary and seemingly undistinguished and fruitless life submitted to Jesus Christ can be transformed and engaged into a life full of promise and hope.

The very God who created us and completes us is capable of tapping our unrealized gifts and abilities, allowing us to rise above untold obstacles and hindrances to courageously run our race. He alone, who gives the horse its strength and clothes its neck with a flowing mane (Job 39:19), equips his children with strength, considers us trustworthy and appoints us to his service (1 Timothy 1:12). We too, in God’s strength, will run our race and with expectant and joy-filled hearts and long for the day that we will hear the words of our Master, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:21).

Father God, as we consider your providence and remember that you are our Redeemer — the Lord Almighty — the Holy One of Israel, may we find strength and confidence to run the race set before us. In His name. Amen.

Acts 4:13

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”

Has anyone seen potential in you that you never identified in yourself?

What extraordinary thing has God done recently in your life?

How does your transformed life in Christ give you promise and hope?



Ecclesiastes 3:1

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

There is indeed a time for everything. It is common for us to misunderstand the how or why of an event or situation, but in time we come to see God’s hand in it. When we are young, we worry about what our peers think of us not understanding that shortly their names and faces will fade from our mind. Their unkind words and deeds will not be easily forgotten but time will help to minimize the acute pain that characterized their careless and insensitive attitudes and slights. For those of us who suffered at the hand of arrogant and oblivious peers, God’s healing balm on our damaged emotions enables us to move past the pain and forgive the unwitting and ignorant perpetrators — God’s time has become a healer.

Life moves on and many of us marry dreaming of a happily ever after experience. So often couples find that God’s pronouncement in Genesis 2:24, “they will become one flesh” is not easily accomplished. The “one flesh” proclamation is great in theory but does not translate well in a home where the spirit of independence and

self-fulfillment reigns. Not surprisingly, saying “I do” means I do promise to reveal my selfishness and I do promise to remind you when you reveal yours. But for those striving to understand the “one flesh” promise, for those committed to following God’s design for a healthy and mutually respectful relationship, God will teach humility and sacrifice. The once contentious union may be God-crafted into a beautiful and grace-filled union. In the course of time, restoration is accomplished and God is glorified in the lives of a committed couple.

Many couples dream of parenting a child. They talk about the size of their perspective family and select the names for their intended children. Sadly, the words infertility and sterility can be a death knell to those who desire to be “fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 9:1). But for those who have cried the lonely tears of a soul desirous of childbirth, God shows He is faithful. As desire yields to redirection, God moves and guides the broken man or woman to find purpose and substance in a timely manner

allowing Him to fulfill His divine purposes through the unique and often misunderstood circumstances of a childless life.

We exist by God’s appointment and we can rest in the fact that He is sovereign over our lives. There is much rest in that, especially when we don’t understand our situation or circumstance. Psalm 145:15 declares, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.” and “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Father God, help us to trust you when our finite minds cannot possibly understand your infinite plan. Help us to love you when our misinterpretation of your will tempts us to be angry or bitter in the face of the cares of this world and unfulfilled dreams. And finally Heavenly Father, forgive us for wanting to escape the very circumstance or situation that You intended to bring us into conformity with your good and perfect will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ecclesiastes 3:1
“There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

Can you identify a time in your life when God moved you in another direction?

When did a disappointment turn into His appointment and a blessing in disguise?

What circumstance did you wish to get out of that ultimately taught you a profound spiritual truth?



Ecclesiastes 11:8

"However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all."

The gift of life becomes more precious with each passing year. It seems that as one ages, the gratitude for life becomes more intense, possibly because the majority of one's days are behind not before, and as such, each day becomes more precious. Youth seems oblivious to the fact that life is fleeting and things will not always remain as they are. A quote attributed to Lady Mary Wortley articulates the attitude of those who have yet to face their inevitable mortality. She writes: "There is nothing can pay one for that invaluable ignorance which is the companion of youth, those sanguine groundless hopes, and that lively vanity which makes all the happiness of life."

Wortley views the ignorance of youth as invaluable and describes them as cheerful in their baseless optimism. The problem with this kind of hopefulness is that it is quickly examined and found wanting when such pleasure is based on favorable situations and an expectant future. Many individuals tramp through decades of their lives clinging to things that have no substance, to people that will disappoint, and to philosophies that will evaporate in the face of life's inevitable trials and tribulations.

The photo above reveals three generations in a family who came face to face with a life-altering scenario. The picture was taken on New Year's Eve with the mother (bottom right) facing her imminent passing after a long battle with breast and bone cancer. Her two young daughters (top and bottom middle) would lose their mother within months of the year-end celebration. The widowed matriarch of the family (bottom left) would experience a parent's greatest fear; she would outlive her only child.

Groundless hope and ignorance cannot stand in the face of life's inevitable adversities. Ecclesiastes 8:7 states, "Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come: No man has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the day of his death." How does a mother cope with the reality that she will not see her young daughters marry or raise a family? What does she think when the natural order of life is upended and a 75 year old mother will be forced to outlive her 48 year old daughter? How does one cope without an expectant future? The Bible reveals Job's thoughts when faced with his own test, "Where then is my hope — who can see any hope for me?" (Job 17:15).

Ultimately Job found his hope in God and his heartfelt reply is recorded in Job 42:5, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." Job's relationship with God changed after encountering Him in and through the trials of life. Job experienced God, intimately and personally. God is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Young and old can have a personal relationship with him. "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4). We are encouraged as we read, "God in his holy dwelling is a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). The family pictured above experienced God's faithfulness and love. They trusted Him and they encountered God in and through their trials.

Our Father, we come before you today admitting our ignorance. We have placed our confidence in people or things that are powerless to sustain us. We submit ourselves to you asking to be filled with your Holy Spirit that we may know and love you as you take your rightful place in our minds and hearts. Teach us to walk faithfully before you all of our days. Humbly in Christ. Amen.

Ecclesiastes 11:8

“However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all.”

Reflect upon a time that God’s grace sustained you through great adversity.

In what person, place or thing have you placed your hope that proved to be an unprofitable investment? How did this draw you closer to God?



Ephesians 2:8, 9

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.”

The Inn at Spanish Bay is nestled among majestic Monterey pines, fronted by a Scottish-style links golf course. The coastline is breathtaking. People gather around fire pits to anxiously await the arrival of the solitary bagpiper, as the sun sets in the western sky. Walking up the fairway, the haunting sound of his pipes mesmerizes and evocatively stirs one's emotions. The glorious sound drifts through the air while the ocean's breeze carries the enchanting strains closer and closer. It is a spectacular sight that was made extraordinary because of the piper's selection, “Amazing Grace,” John Newton's timeless and most recognizable hymn.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now, I see.”

I prayed to receive Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, on a Sunday. My physical birth and my spiritual birth occurred on the same day, 30 years apart. My friends and family did not believe that my newfound “faith” would last, as I was not a person that one would have identified as a candidate for salvation. I moved out of my parent's home at the age of 17 and moved into a world that legalized abortion, endorsed sexual promiscuity

and introduced the disco era. The 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever* aptly depicted the prevailing attitudes and actions of its young adults and I was a “lost” soul begging to be “found.” I was searching for contentment in people, places and things and was left wanting. Blaise Pascal wrote, “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” Once I surrendered my life to Christ, I found what I'd been longing for. St. Augustine said it best, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

“T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved. How precious did that Grace appear the hour I first believed.”

My conversion was dramatic. I'd never known love so consuming, so energizing and so fulfilling. Slowly, I felt as though everything in the world was finally making sense. I was consumed with reading God's word. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“Through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come. T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far and

Grace will lead us home.”

I did not anticipate the hills and valleys that characterize the believer's walk. At times I feared leaving my closest companions: fear, guilt and shame, because they were the “devil” I knew. But the ceaseless love of God led me to unfamiliar paths, guiding me out of bondage and into freedom. “He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights” (2 Samuel 22:34).

“The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”

I rest secure in Him. “No good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless” (Ps. 84:11). “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26). “I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me” (Psalm 3:5).

“When we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.”

Father God, may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Ephesians 2:8,9

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.”

What do you think about those who sacrifice themselves for others?

When you think about Jesus dying so that you can live, what is your practical response to this profound truth?

Write a letter to Jesus. Thank Him for the undeserved things he has done for you and the many ways He continues to prove that He loves you.



Galatians 5:1

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

The graceful and fluid bird soared in the winter sky, ascending through the air drawn toward the sun as a moth is drawn to flame. As it rose in ever increasing spirals it appeared as though it might will itself into the sun. Unfettered it flew through its vast domain with agility and ease. This is how God intended it to be. And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky” (Genesis 1:20).

As I admired God’s handiwork in this beautiful bird, I thought about the words of Matthew 6:26, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” What do the birds intuitively know that we do not? I believe the lesson for us is to live in such a way that we are not held captive and enslaved by the cares of the world. We learn to be content in every situation and trust that our Father is willing and able to meet our every need. According to the National Center of Health Statistics (NCHS) a large number of Americans do not get this concept. In the NCHS report issued in 2011, the rate of antidepressant use among teens and adults (12 and older) increased by almost 400 percent between 1988-1994 and 2005-2008. Fulton Oursler said it best: “Many of us crucify ourselves between two thieves — regret for the past and fear of the future.”

If the death of Jesus bought our liberty and set us free to experience abundant life, why then are so many of us simply existing from day-to-day, living in misery and discontent? The first part of John 10:10 reveals that, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” The Greek word for thief comes from “kleptés,” referring to a thief who steals by stealth (in secret), rather than in the open with violence. Traditional commentaries do not necessarily attribute the “thief” to be Satan as much as representative of all false teachers and religious systems. I’m wondering if the thief is

not residing outside of us but actually living within the secret thoughts of our minds stealing away present contentment and tormenting us about what we cannot control and are powerless to change.

Often we cry out as the Psalmists, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” God encourages us through the words of Jeremiah 29:11 when He declares, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” These words should enable us to abandon our fears but sadly that is not always the case. Unfortunately, it is often desperate circumstances or situations that gain our attention and realign our perspective; we only find rest for our souls when what we hold dear has been stripped away. It is then that we understand that God is all we need when God is all we have.

Again, John 10:10 declares, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” As we relinquish our desperate attempts to control our lives, God gives us His peace. We learn to trust him implicitly and the elusive freedom that we once yearned for slowly becomes a reality. We gratefully relinquish our days and moments to the One who died to set us free. “We demolish arguments and every pretention that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Heavenly Father, your word reads, ‘I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them’ (Isaiah 42:16). May we learn to trust you in all situations and rest in the knowledge that your strength is sufficient for the day and your power is made perfect in our weakness. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Galatians 5:1
“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”

What aspect of nature speaks to you personally about God’s majesty?

What regrets of yesterday or fears of tomorrow keep you from enjoying your life in Christ today?

What does your thought life reveal? Do you really believe that God’s strength is sufficient for the day and that His power is made perfect in our weakness? Pray for God to deliver you from all that holds you captive.



Hebrews 6:19, 20

*“We have this hope as an anchor
for the soul, firm and secure.”*

While driving through California’s 17-mile scenic drive in Pebble Beach, our family stopped to photograph one of the most infamous trees in North America, the Lone Cypress. Standing proudly on the granite hillside, the Lone Cypress has long been a symbol of strength, grace and beauty. Morton Cathro wrote the following about the Lone Cypress in his June 7, 1987 article in the Los Angeles Times: “Ravaged by arsonists’ fire splattered with pranksters’ paint, stripped by vandals and whipped by relentless ocean winds, one of America’s sturdiest and most familiar natural landmarks still poses proudly for yet another generation of camera-carrying travelers.”

Generations have made a pilgrimage to pay homage to this hardy tree that is representative of survival and perseverance. Its presence reminds us of ourselves and others who have experienced the fire of adversity and the relentless assaults that come from living in a fallen world. Through respectful admiration we are reminded of the times that our human dignity has been stripped away and we have lain naked, bare and exposed as a result of uninvited and uncontrollable emotional or physical afflictions.

The common denominator of humanity is that we cannot escape life’s

adversities. Although we collectively acknowledge that humanity does not permit us to transition from time into eternity unscathed; our finite minds cannot comprehend the unutterable and often profound suffering that resides with mortality. The most faith-filled followers have questioned God’s intentions in the midst of dire circumstances. Matthew 11:2-3 records the words of John the Baptist before his beheading, “When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” It was John, who identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. If the one person who ought to have known better responds to hardship with such qualms, what is left for the rest of us?

Jesus responds to all who struggle in the midst of dire and unrelenting circumstances. Mark 8:33 reads, “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” We do not view our circumstances through eyes stamped with eternity, but through a lens that cannot comprehend the Divine. Often the pain that accompanies us in our worldly journey eradicates the Romans 8:28 perspectives that affirms “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called

according to his purpose.” Our brief sojourn on earth, as difficult as it may be, should be regarded from the eternal perspective as penned by Paul in Romans 8:18 when he declared, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

As the Lone Cypress thrives anchored to the granite hillside, we endure through the vicissitudes of life as we are anchored to God through His Word, and by the power of His Spirit. “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:39).

Father God, hold us close to you when the pain of life’s journey draws us away. Guard and encourage our hearts when hope has been eclipsed by despair. May we hold firm to the fact that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. May we grasp that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37). This we pray for Thy Glory, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Hebrews 6:19, 20

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

When torrents of adversities have rushed into your life, what did God do to keep you from being swept away?

Is your hope in God or do you put your hope in your wealth, your relationships, your accomplishments or your status in life, things that may offer temporary feelings of wellbeing?

What does being anchored to God mean to you?



John 1:10

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”

It was one of those lessons that comes out of nowhere, catches you off guard and leaves you humbled and broken before God. It started off as a day of anticipation and excitement. We were sitting at the airport waiting to board the plane that would transport us from the east coast to the west coast. We were engaged in a favorite past time of travelers, people watching. Airports are a hub for exposed humanity. The human race is there on parade, raw and uncensored.

He approached the gate, worn and tattered. This tall, hobbling man was massive and unkempt. To my shame I thought, “Wouldn’t it be my luck to be seated next to that man during this long flight.” Once on board, I approached my seat with resignation and annoyance as my fears were realized. It would be a long flight. As I took my seat I didn’t speak to the man, as if my silence could eradicate his presence.

He was altogether undesirable. His odor was intense and his breathing labored. As the hours marched on, he placed his head back and raised his arms above his head and fell fast asleep. As I clung to what was left of my seat, my annoyance turned to anger as the

sights, sounds and smells emanating from the man were overwhelming. I heard a comment from a passenger behind me saying, “She deserves a medal when we land.” The intensity of the experience reached a crescendo and I was forced to make a hurried escape to the toilet where I threw up. As I exited the restroom, the steward offered me a cup of tea to settle my stomach. Did he assume me to be a novice traveler or was he aware of my plight?

The battle was raging within. As I prayed for compassion I remembered that God loves the unlovely. Jesus’ words hung heavy in the air, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” As I walked through the cabin I prayed for a new perspective. It was as if I had thrown up my pride and arrogance and was returning to the stranger emptied of my conceit.

Back in my seat, I determined to look the man in the eye and begin a conversation. It was as if He had been waiting for someone to talk to him, his words came up and out like a torrent. He had served in Vietnam, forced to choose between saving his life or taking the life of the little girl pointing a gun at him. He killed the child and

in the process killed his soul. He never recovered. His discharge from the armed services gained him three trips to a veteran’s psychiatric hospital. Plied with mind numbing drugs his body deteriorated and while the steroids and eleven surgeries kept him alive, he became unrecognizable to himself, morbidly obese and tormented by the unrelenting image of the fallen child.

Through my tears, I saw a man who, though alive, was dead in many ways. He had sacrificed his life for our freedom and we esteemed him not. Later, as I walked off of the plane, I was enormously grateful that God used this unsuspecting serviceman to change my heart and remind me the cost of freedom. To you dear veteran I say, “Welcome home.”

Father God, may we judge nothing before the appointed time; may we wait until you come as you will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time, each will receive his praise from God (1 Corinthians 4:5). In Jesus name. Amen.

John 1:10
“He was in the world,
and though the world was made through him
the world did not recognize him.”

Think about a time when you misjudged someone. How did the Holy Spirit open your eyes to the truth?

How has pride hindered you from considering others better than yourself?

Prayerfully ask God to reveal opportunities for you to place others' interests above your own.



1 Corinthians 4:7

*“For who makes you
different from anyone else?”*

Immediately noticeable in the midst of the herd of black cows was one that was white. This cow stood out from the rest, easily recognizable, clearly different.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul writing to the believers in Rome wrote, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

In our world where political correctness demands that all conform to the societal edicts of the day, we fear being different.

We have witnessed the incalculable ramifications to those whose voice would not be silenced as they stood out, stood up and stood firm in faith, believing God and His Word. We have observed the professional, political and personal demise of brothers and sisters who dared to be different and we envision our own demise should we follow suit.

We need not conceal our distinctiveness because of fear and anxiety. God is able to keep us in the

midst of a world run amuck. Psalm 12 reads, “You, Lord, will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked, who freely strut about when what is vile is honored by the human race.”

We are washed white by the blood of Christ even as the blackness of sin surrounds us. We are different because Jesus Christ lives within us. Isaiah 51 speaks to the hearts of the redeemed, “Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.” Take heart, the righteousness of the Lord will last forever and His salvation through all generations.

Our distinctiveness defines who we are in Christ and His work in this world is completed as we stand fast in the face of adversity and criticism, daring to be different.

Father God, may you strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you (Isaiah 35). In the name of Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

1 Corinthians 4:7
“For who makes you different from anyone else?”

Think of several ways in which your faith makes you different from the world?

How do you respond when faced with challenges to your faith that will force you to stand out from the crowd?

How do you feel when you choose the “path of least resistance” and compromise your biblical beliefs? How do you recover after compromising your Christian values?



John 14:6

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

For one week during the month of May, the French Riviera becomes a mecca for the rich and famous. Founded in 1946, The Cannes International Film Festival previews new films of all genres from around the world. The red carpet ushers the elite and the hopeful elect into its doors at the Palais des Festivals as tourists view the yacht-filled harbor and wait for a glimpse of a favorite celebrity.

The trip to Cannes afforded the opportunity to witness a prestigious gathering. The harbored city was breathtaking, profuse with the magnificence one would expect of this beautiful European seaside. The Festival attracts an abundance of spectators, but participation is restricted and the "by invitation only" decree limits involvement to primarily celebrities and individuals involved in the film industry. In an effort to include the general public in some of the festivities, an outdoor open-air cinema, available to everyone, screens a different film each night. Although this allows individuals outside of the film industry to partake of some of the festivities without the issued "accreditation slip," the general public's participation remains limited.

The exclusive nature of the Cannes Film Festival is not unlike countless other organizations where membership or access is limited. This practice of select individuals receiving rights and privileges while others are excluded makes Jesus' inclusive manner a concept that may be difficult to comprehend. Although the desire to belong is a human emotional need, some are uncomfortable with the simplicity of Jesus' appeal. Rejecting the spiritual laws of acceptance into the family of God, some fashion their own decrees, laboring for approval and denying the "accreditation slip," the grace Jesus offers as he extends a loving invitation to all. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus' call is an open invitation that speaks to the universal desire to belong is witnessed through his encounters with the tax collectors, sinners, and the Samaritan woman in the books of Matthew and John. Jesus' substitutionary death fulfilled the righteous provision required by a Holy

God. Showing no partiality, His death paved the way for man's redemption, the forgiveness of his sins. "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22-24). Where discrimination and bias frustrates our ability to connect and exclusivity challenges our best intentions and sensibilities, Jesus beckons all to come and addresses the human desire to belong. "And, I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18).

Heavenly Father, regardless of status, celebrity, influence or merit of our own, you invite all to come. The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let the one who hears say, Come. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price (Revelation 22:17). The Spirit we received brought about our adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8:15). In Jesus' name. Amen.

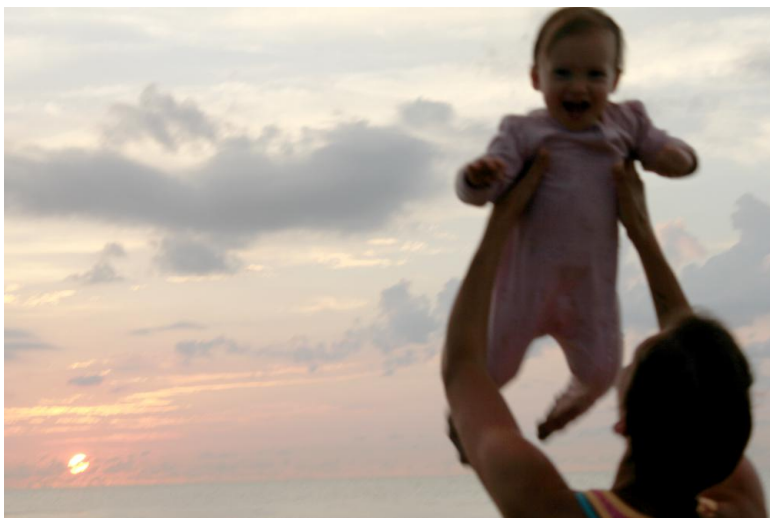
John 14:6

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."

When was the last time you felt rejected and alone? How did you respond to wanting to "belong" and feeling like you were not wanted or overlooked?

In an effort to gain acceptance, have you compromised living the righteous life that God desires?

What attitudes and actions did Jesus display that we might emulate when we are tempted to abandon our spiritual principals in order to fit in or gain acceptance?



Lamentations 4:18

“Our end was near, our days were numbered, for our end had come.”

Despite our cultural diversity, political persuasion, economic status or religious preference, there is one commonality that humanity shares; no one can escape the fact that one day we will no longer dwell on this earth. It has been said that the heritage we were given is not as important as the legacy we leave behind. As we reflect on the measure of our lives and ponder the inevitability of our departure, we cannot help but consider what will be our legacy. Although the Bible is replete with stories that provide us with role models to follow, there are lessons to be learned from the life of Jacob.

Jacob's life teaches that we don't need to be perfect to be blessed by God. We can identify with Jacob because in some ways, his life echoes our own sinfulness. Jacob's human weaknesses and struggles with God are laid bare throughout his life story. However, as Jacob matured in his faith, his dependence upon God grew in increasing measure. After a lifetime of striving to control his own life, Jacob surrendered control to God who ultimately blessed this imperfect person greatly.

Jacob's life teaches that our legacy will ultimately be defined by our faithfulness and obedience to God. The two greatest commandments in the Bible are found in Matthew 22:34-

40. Jacob fulfilled the first commandment as he loved the Lord his God with all his heart, soul and mind. He fulfilled the second commandment as he loved his neighbor as himself. Jacob exhibited love for his nearest neighbor, his children, when on his death bed, he spoke truth into their lives. No doubt some of his words were difficult for his son's to hear, but Jacob was faithful and obedient to God and is praised in Hebrews 11 for the way he passed on the blessing near his life's end.

In Genesis 48:27 we read that Jacob (also known as Israel) told his son Joseph, “I am about to die.” Immediately following in Chapter 49, Jacob assembles his sons saying, “Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come.” Some of Jacob's predictions to his sons were blessings while others were warnings. This man, flawed in his humanity but faithfully devoted to God, leaves the earthly scene by individually encouraging, cautioning and affirming each of his sons, speaking of their past and their future. His God-inspired parting words appear to be carefully and thoughtfully articulated with every one of the sons given the blessing appropriate to each (Genesis 49:28). The words we speak will make a difference in the lives of our children.

It is incumbent upon us to share God's word with our children, to prepare them for their future and instruct them while we have the opportunity to do so. If we are lax in this regard, we should pray as the Psalmists, “Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is” (Psalm 39:4). “Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end” (Psalm 119:33).

Father God, Jesus, empower us by your Holy Spirit to live in faithful obedience to your word. We are reminded, The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law, (Deuteronomy 29:29). As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance, (Daniel 12:13). We rejoice that through Christ Jesus, we have been redeemed and the blessing given to Abraham came to us and, by faith, generations to come may receive the promised Spirit. We trust in your word that reads, For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants (Isaiah 44:3). In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lamentations 4:18

“Our end was near, our days were numbered, for our end had come.”

Have you ever had an existential crisis, a moment at which you questioned the meaning of your life, purpose or value of your existence?

Do you fear death? What do you believe will happen to you when you die? (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

How can Jesus' promise of eternal life dispel fearful thoughts of your yet to be experienced future?



Lamentations 3:22,23
"Because of the Lord's
great love we are not
consumed, for his
compassions never fail. They
are new every morning; great
is your faithfulness."

The sun rising in the morning sky is magnificent as the golden orb makes its grand appearance. Its ascent into the cerulean sky inspires and reminds us of the majesty of God. As the brightness rises in the sky, the beautiful rays of flashing light break through the clouds and the brilliance of this demonstration cannot be contained. Its consuming light absorbs the blue sky and the sun's warmth blankets the earth. On this particular morning as the reflected light touches the ocean's surface it gives the appearance of glittering jewels ushering a path back to the sun.

As morning declares the beginning of a new day, flowers unfold and raise their petals to the sky as if to welcome the arrival of the light and birds sing in joyful pleasure, their sweet voices giddy with glee. With the dawn of each new day, we are reminded of the faithfulness of God. Morning births hope in our hearts as we anticipate the goodness of God and His compassions that never fail. We are grateful for our every breath and anticipate walking in concert with His Spirit and experiencing the abundant life that He desires for us. Morning speaks of fresh opportunities and God's unfailing love. The emergence of morning's light swallows the darkness of night and reminds us that the darkness of our sins is swallowed by the Light of the World, the Savior Jesus Christ.

The sun sustains the earth, as the Son sustains our souls. Without the sun, darkness would fill the earth and there would be no growth, no life. And so it is with man and His Savior. Our darkened understanding is replaced by the mind of Christ and He becomes the source of our spiritual growth and God-ordained life. We daily surrender our will to the Living God and we are not disappointed. He always chooses far better than we would have chosen for ourselves. When we love Him with abandonment, we find that He is more than we ever thought or imagined. He is our all in all. His Spirit fills us with His presence and Christ's abiding love refreshes us daily bringing rest and peace unspeakable.

Father God, thank you for the sun that warms our earth and lights our world. Thank you for the morning that brings hope to our hearts and reminds us of your faithfulness. Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who redeemed us with His blood and provided us with the Holy Spirit, our confidant and guide as we walk through life. May our darkened understanding be enlightened as a result of our relationship with the Son of the Living God. May we never forget that you have saved the best for last. As wonderful as our relationship is with you here on earth, it will pale in comparison to eternity with you when we see you face to face. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lamentations 3:22, 23

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

How do you respond to God when you don’t understand what He’s doing in your life or in the life of another?

Which scriptures speak to the faithfulness of God?

How might memorizing these scriptures change your perspective during those times when you find yourself questioning God’s faithfulness?



Luke 8:24
“The disciples went
and woke him, saying,
‘Master, Master, we
are going to drown!’”

*H*e got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided and all was calm (Luke 8:24). Have you been there? Has life ever dealt you a blow that made you feel as though you were drowning? It is that overwhelming sense of dread accompanied by fear and paralysis. She knows that feeling, the unsuspecting wife who is told she is no longer loved. She is overwhelmed at the prospect of facing her future without her beloved husband.

Your neighbor knows the feeling. He was the loyal employee with 27 years dedicated service to his company; he rarely missed work and loved his job. When he was called to a meeting in Human Resources, he was stunned to learn that he would be joining the ranks of the unemployed. The company calls it downsizing but it's really about ageism. Barely coherent and numb from shock, the calculating employer wields the coup de grâce to the faithful employee by having security guards escort him to the nearest exit.

Life changes in an instant, a future filled with planned vacations and enjoyable activities is abruptly and decidedly abandoned and medical treatments replace travel itineraries and dreams of the future.

How do we survive life's inevitable storms? What do we do when we feel that Jesus is asleep as the wind and raging waters swirl about us? We want to cling to Jesus, but He slips through our wet and trembling hands. We scream that we are drowning, but He appears to be apathetic to our pleas. The sound of the howling wind and the force of the turbulent waters have the capacity to confuse and disorient even the most faithful follower.

Paul articulated the intensity of his despair in 2 Corinthians 1:8, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.”

Living in this fallen world ensures these types of storms will inevitably visit us all in some way and at some time. We are encouraged when Luke reminds us that Jesus spoke to the wind and the raging waters and the storm subsided. Jesus will, in the same way, speak to His children — and the storms in our hearts and minds will recede.

It is often in the midst of our prevailing heartbreak that we are sustained by Jesus' faithful promises. When the Holy Spirit speaks to us, we hear the voice of Christ, our heart aligns with the heart of God, and we are calmed. We may not always understand the inner workings of God's sovereignty, but the trusting heart knows that no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless (Psalm 84:11).

The veracity of God's character anchors His children securely in the promise that His ultimate intent is to prosper, not to harm, to give hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). We are reminded in Job 36:15, “The suffering are delivered in their suffering as God speaks to them in their affliction.” We are exhorted in Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” Our souls find rest in Him alone.

Father God, thank you for quieting the storms of our soul, for quieting our hearts with your words and for mercifully speaking to us in our affliction. Let the one who is wise take heed and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord (Psalm 107:33). Grant us, O Lord, an eternal perspective that we may overcome our fears and trepidation and live in the light of God's infinite grace and mercy. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Luke 8:24

“The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, Master, we’re going to drown!’”

When has Jesus asked you to step out in faith and trust Him in the midst of the storms in your life?

Why do you think God allows sorrow and suffering?

It is calm and peaceful in “the eye of the storm.” How can Jesus be like “the eye of the storm” to you during the tempests in your life?



Luke 10:40

“But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.”

Sometimes it seems as though life is flying by. The fast-paced existence that finds many of us barely keeping our head above water has become an unwelcome standard of living. We have become used to the frenetic demands of our culture. We speed through life scarcely catching our breath, unconsciously and mindlessly racing through the day's activities.

Many of us live in a state of perpetual anticipation, planning for some future event while wishing or waiting our life away. We talk about just getting through the day's events while balancing employment, extended family obligations and household responsibilities. The days turn into months and the months into years and we find ourselves living in a reactionary approach to life, putting out today's fires and waking to do it all over again tomorrow.

Our anxiety-filled lives are taking a toll on our emotional and physical health and destructively affecting families in general. Single parent homes are on the rise with about 13.7 million single parents in the United States according to a report released by the U.S. Census Bureau (Custodial

Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2009). Without the benefit of a spouse to share the obligations and responsibilities associated with raising a family, single parents must learn to juggle the activities of their lives with little or no supports, exacerbating the normal stresses of life.

The Bible is filled with admonitions about setting healthy boundaries and living intentionally for Christ. Jesus clearly illustrates this point in Luke 10:38-42, “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ The Lord said, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’”

Christ's reproach of Martha regarding her busyness is convicting. As a Type A overachieving personality,

my struggles are ongoing as I strive to prioritize my relationship with Jesus over all else. It is easy to become entangled by good and noble gestures that ultimately reduce our relationship with Jesus to an afterthought. It is only as we seek the King and His Kingdom that all these things will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:33). “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (2 Corinthians 9:10).

Father God, as our society embraces activities over relationships, worships and serves created things over the Creator, and sacrifices rest for turmoil, may you speak truth into our hearts and may we choose that which is better. As those who have surrendered our lives to Christ, we belong to the truth and we set our hearts at rest in your presence (1 John 3:19). Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 10:40

“But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.”

In what ways do you identify with Martha or a Mary in your Christian walk?

What distractions keep you from experiencing an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus: your job, your family, or your hobbies?

Prayerfully ask God to reveal areas that are hindering you from enjoying sweet fellowship with Jesus. Pray that “knowing Jesus” becomes the principal desire of your heart.



Luke 24:45

*“Then he opened their minds
so they could understand the
Scriptures.”*

Easter is approaching and for those who love Jesus Christ, it is a day of unbridled celebration. Easter is, after all, the foundation of the Christian faith. If Christ had not risen from the dead, then our faith would be in vain. But our faith is resolute because Christ is risen.

The week leading up to Easter, known as Holy Week, is rich with stories that at once devastate and enrich the heart. We are amazed at the mingling of grief and joy while fully aware that the devastation of Good Friday was essential to the ecstasy of Easter morning. Our feelings span a spectrum of emotions as we consider the days beginning with Maundy Thursday and culminating with Resurrection Sunday.

Charles Dickens wrote, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” And so it is that often in the midst of some great tragedy, something beautiful is birthed, grief and joy are simultaneously experienced. It is often during the most desperate of times that God’s presence is experienced in extraordinary ways. For those of us who have been in the furnace of

affliction, we remember the intense intimacy that we shared with God and they are some of our most cherished times with Him.

The agonizing and torturous death of Jesus Christ provided us access to God. The paradox of grief and joy commingled is never observed as poignantly as it is in the Easter narrative. Speaking of the moment of Jesus’ death, Matthew 27:50 reports, “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” This veil separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the entire Temple. Only the High Priest was permitted to pass beyond the veil once each year during Yom Kippur to make atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16). The veil was a constant reminder that sin separated people from the presence of God. The tearing of the veil at the moment of Jesus’ death symbolized that by His blood sacrifice the way into the Holy of Holies was now open to those who come to God through Jesus Christ as mediator.

Regarding Jesus, John 1:11-13 explains, “He came to that which was

his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

As children of God, our finite mind cannot fully comprehend an infinite God but through His word. Luke 24:45 encourages us, “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”

Enraptured and surrendered to Jesus Christ, the veil is taken away and with one voice we exclaim, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Father God, we thank you for your passion, your intense love for mankind, that compelled you to send your Son Jesus to Calvary’s cross where His innocent blood was shed for the redemption of mankind. May the Holy Spirit empower us to follow the pattern of your life. In view of God’s mercy, may we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, as our true and proper worship (Romans 12:1). In Jesus’ Holy name we pray. Amen.

Luke 24:45

“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”

To what degree has God’s passion for mankind shaped your life?

What does “offering your body as a living sacrifice” mean to you?

Review your life and praise God that He has brought you into the kingdom of the Son he loves.



Philippians 2:13

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

The cardinal, beautiful and resplendent in its red coat, stood out among the green pines. He sat perched and attentive on the branch, surveying his surroundings. I snapped the camera incessantly in an effort to capture the image of this stunning creature of God. He appeared in an instant, rested among the dense conifers, then abruptly took flight, disappearing from my sight.

God’s magnificent handiwork is often observed in snapshot moments. Opportunities to recognize and appreciate the majesty of God go largely unnoticed. It is not that God is obscure and illusive, but that our frenzied and perpetual activities preclude us from practicing and acknowledging the presence of God in our daily lives. As God-consciousness is prayerfully developed and intentionally pursued, one’s senses are awakened and awesome wonder replaces mediocrity.

Many years ago, through the teachings of David and Karen Mains, I began to apply a practice that purposefully aided me in developing a

recognition of God and His involvement in my daily activities. Karen Mains outlined four basic principles for hunting and finding God by searching for God through: 1) any obvious answer to prayer; 2) any unexpected evidence of his care; 3) any help to do God’s work in the world; and 4) any unusual linkage or timing.

Through the application of these principles, I began to capture snapshot moments with God consistently throughout the day. Jeremiah 29:13 explains, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” “God sightings” were diligently chronicled in my journal. Examples of God’s care were recognized when I became the recipient of an unforeseen kindness expressed through a thought, word or deed. I witnessed God’s care through teachers who lovingly and sacrificially invested themselves in the academic and moral development of our children. When ministry opportunities were successfully accomplished in the power of God’s Spirit, God was praised for helping me to do His work in the world. And

finally, when God orchestrated events to occur in a manner that portrayed His impeccable sense of timing, I learned to trust him and found rest for my soul.

“God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). Psalm 34:8 exhorts us, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” As our spiritual palette is awakened to the reality of His omnipresence, our lives become a quest. We anticipate His involvement in all aspects of our being and we join the Psalmist in thanksgiving, “Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long” (Psalm 25:5).

Father God, instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning (Proverbs 9:9). May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all (2 Corinthians 13:14). In His name we pray. Amen.

Philippians 2:13

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

For the next week, daily find at least one item from the list below to help you recognize how God is involved in your daily activities. Journal your observations and continue this exercise as you find God in fresh and unanticipated experiences.

- * Any obvious answer to prayer.
- * Any unexpected evidence of God's care.
- * Any help to do God's work in the world.
- * Any unusual linkage or timing.



Photo by marie kelley photography

Proverbs 23:25
"May your father
and mother rejoice;
may she who gave you
birth be joyful!"

The children are adults now, blessed with children of their own. Amazingly, the births of our son and daughter are etched in our minds and hearts and replayed at will. Like videos that capture moments in time, these remembered film reels have not faded but are preserved and conditioned with each nostalgic journey back to those miraculous birth events and the succeeding joyful years of parenthood.

Parenting is profound in its ability to eradicate self-absorption. The birth of one's child opens the heart to a love so consuming that we are forever changed, inescapably altered. Knowing that our child's life depends on our sustained love and nurture is at once delightful and daunting.

One need not give physical birth to a child to understand the unfathomable love of a parent for a child. Many parent/child relationships exist with the same intensity and dedication when children are grafted into a family without a personal childbirth experience. The unconditional love of the parent is indistinguishable regardless of the child's origins.

And so it is with the redeemed of Christ. We, standing in faith and dearly loved by God, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root

(Romans 11:17). The Father has lavished great love on us, that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1). He has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), and as a mother comforts her child, so we are comforted by God (Isaiah 66:13). Our finite minds cannot comprehend the depth or intensity of the Father's love for us. Song of Solomon 8:6 reads, "Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave." Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9).

As our understanding of God's love matures, only then are we moved to grateful praise and humble adoration, appreciatively the recipients of the infinite affection of Jesus Christ, the God of Israel, the Everlasting Father. We are ever aware that we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19), and that our children are a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3).

Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth — you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way (2 Chronicles 6:14). We praise you from everlasting to everlasting. The Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children (Psalm 103:17). In Jesus' name. Amen.

Proverbs 23:25

“May your father and mother rejoice; may she who gave you birth be joyful!”

In what ways has your heavenly Father lavished love on you?

What comfort has He provided you?

In what way has God used individuals to show you love and care in keeping with a “spiritual” parent/mentor? Are these individuals aware of the influence they have been on your life? Prayerfully seek opportunities to encourage them as they serve the Lord.



Photo by marie kelley photography

Psalm 16:6

"The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places."

We will be celebrating 39 years of marriage. We met when I was 17 years young and fresh out of high school. My first employment opportunity placed me in his setting and ultimately placed him in my heart.

I couldn't have anticipated our future together for we had little in common but our uncanny ability to communicate on a level that permitted mutual understanding and unconditional acceptance. The unceasing flow of self-revelation, the unbridled exchange of intimate thoughts and feelings provided the fodder for a penetratingly cherished friendship.

These mutually gratifying conversations continued for 10 years until it became apparent that the friendly relationship had blossomed into deep affection and emotional tenderness. The years of openly sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows had enabled us to know one another so intimately that we were able to trust with abandon and audacity.

After several years of marriage while speaking at a church conference, my dear and beloved soul-mate described our relationship by quoting this George Eliot (aka Mary Anne Evans) poem, "Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor to measure words but to

pour them out, just as it is, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keeping what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away."

The quote accurately describes our relationship and represents a vow so consuming that it defies reason and eradicates disbelief. My reluctant heart denied such a love was possible and on occasion tested the veracity of the words only to find the fortress of this commitment impenetrable. Genesis 2:24 confirms, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." The consistent and faithful love of this God-fearing man embodies the heart of God who in Jeremiah 31:3 exults, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness."

During our 39 years of marriage, we have not always been able to negotiate the complexities of self-disclosure. We retreat. Our intimacy interrupted by some external force and we default to self-protection and isolation. It is precisely here that we need to thrust ourselves upon our Heavenly Father to renew our Spirit and refresh our sensibilities. We commit ourselves to Jesus Christ. We prayerfully ask for understanding seeking God's perspective in the matter. "For by the grace given me I

say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you" (Romans 12:3).

Our love has withstood life's challenges; the care of aging and infirm parents, personal health issues, and vastly divergent views about financial matters, child-rearing techniques and recreational pursuits. Yet, we remain steadfast in our resolve to commit ourselves to God through prayer and obedience, finding direction, comfort and stability in Christ and His Word. "Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him for God is our refuge" (Psalm 62:5-8).

Father God, we thank you that the boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places. We rejoice that we have stood together through the capriciousness of life enveloped by your unfailing love. We have learned that one may be overpowered, but two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). We live to give you glory! Prayerfully in Jesus' name. Amen.

Psalm 16:6

“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.”

In what ways have you learned to be content in whatever circumstance God places you?

In what ways do you respond to circumstances that you cannot change?

If you have not already done so, pray that God will bring you at least one trustworthy prayer partner to intercede with you knowing that a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.



Psalm 16:11

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

The path was small, shrouded by foliage. The plants made a canopy obscuring the view of the vast ocean and never-ending blue sky. A trail sliced through the soft marble-white sand, and footprints marked the way to the beach. The halophytic corridor served to keep one on the narrow way until at once the vast ocean unfolded like a fan.

The path reminds me of the pilgrim’s journey with Christ. God’s footprints can be followed through the reading of His Word. We trace his steps and observe the inmost thoughts and attitudes of His heart as we observe His actions. The blueprint for life is revealed to us if we are inclined to follow it. We observe how he walked and what he experienced along the path to Golgotha and we thank Him for His sacrifice because we know our lives are rich because He suffered much. His path led to our salvation, difficult as it was, and He never wavered. We have hope, because we have His example to follow. He has not left us alone and wanting as we navigate our way through this life.

The path reminds me of the footprints of the saints, lovers of Christ who have been blessed with a pleasant journey. These righteous souls have been given much but through their bounty they have unassumingly enriched the lives of others and heeded the counsel of the Psalmist when he wrote, “Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.” These benevolent saints share their time, talent and treasure so lavishly that they forever change the quality of life for others and, in so doing,

have imitated Christ in their selflessness.

The path reminds me of the footprints of the saints, who through no fault of their own, have been afflicted with unspeakable hardships and burdens. Some afflicted through disease, some through gross injustices perpetrated against them and some through difficulties that come as a result of living in a fallen world. The footprints of these saints show us how to live under dire and desperate circumstances. They show us how to live as overcomers when there seems to be no earthly reason for joy. This bitter path, laden with seemingly insurmountable tests, is sweetened by the salt of the overcomers tears and we are encouraged to press on toward the prize set before us. The saints on this path are imitators of Christ in their perseverance.

We are convicted by the beauty of this path and the myriad footprints that had left their impression there. We ponder the path of our lives and contemplate our own footprints. What is my life’s sojourn teaching others? Is anyone following me and if they are, where am I leading them and what have they learned from me? Where am I going and do I want others to follow?

Father God, You have given us an example to follow through your life, death and resurrection. Your footprints have given clear guidance for our life’s journey. May the footprints that we leave serve to guide others into the path of righteousness and may the example that we set lead others to Christ and the abundant life that comes as a result of loving Him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Psalm 16:11

“You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

Has God blessed you through the benevolence of another's time, talent or treasure? Thank God for those individuals and praise Him for their generosity.

How has God used another's path of suffering to teach you how to live victoriously in Christ? Thank God for those individuals and praise Him for their example.

Has Christ's path of humility and obedience stirred you to emulate His life? Thank God for Jesus and pray for a willingness to obey His command, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”



Psalm 18:33

“He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights.”

For as long as I can remember, fear has been my constant companion. This distressing emotion seemed to reach a crescendo and accelerated into full-blown panic attacks in the second decade of my life. Awakened out of a sound sleep at 3 a.m., heart pounding out of my chest, I’d find myself awash in sweat feeling as if I was losing my mind, thinking I was going to die and secretly hoping I would, ending the terrifying experience.

This was the condition I found myself in when introduced to Jesus by a loving and compassionate relative. As I embarked on cultivating a personal and intimate relationship with the Lord, I began to read God’s word and came to understand that he did not desire that I live out my days terrorized by fear and anxiety. I prayed that God would guide me away from these deeply entrenched debilitating emotions and help me to learn to live courageously and calmly under his care. It was during this time that he placed a book in my path that would profoundly change my sensitivities and enrich my life.

While reading Hannah Hurnard’s allegorical novel, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places*, I thoroughly identified with the novel’s main character: Much-Afraid. As the moving story unfolded, I was captivated by Much-Afraid’s journey toward God as she changed from a frightened, deformed, lost soul into a beautiful, spiritually connected joyful being. The book had a life-altering affect upon me with parts of the figurative language lingering in my mind throughout the decades of my own spiritual pilgrimage.

The title of Hannah Hurnard’s book is from an Old Testament book: Habakkuk 3:19, “The LORD God [is] my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds’ [feet], and he will make me to walk upon mine high places” (KJV).

Throughout the years of my faith-walk with God, he has used this particular scripture to encourage me and has further fortified me by using the physical presence of deer during moments when I needed to be reminded of his

promise. I have been both humbled and inspired when in the course of extreme anguish, I have cried out to God for deliverance, and he, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, has at that precise moment placed a deer in my path.

As I gaze upon the majestic and beautiful animal before me, the scripture symbolizing the sure-footedness of the deer is brought to my remembrance and my perspective is renewed. I remember that the Chief Shepherd that provided the deer with swiftness of hoof, makes my feet like the deer, gives me firm footing and leads me out of the valley to the High Places.

As God transforms us from the timid and fearful Much-Afraid to a lover of Christ; filled with Grace and Glory, we will endure many trials and tribulations on our journey to our High Places. It is at these times when we are tempted to withdraw from the battle and surrender to fear and defeat, we need to be reminded that: “God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Theodore Roosevelt once said: “It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles ...The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, ...errs and comes up short again and again, ...but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; ...so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”

Father God, as we make our way with you, our Chief Shepherd, out of the valley up to the High Places, may you strengthen our feeble legs, may you give us feet swift and sure as the deer and may we be filled with your grace and glory as we trust you to lead us safely through the unpredictable and often daunting experiences of life. In the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 18:33

“He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he causes me to stand on the heights.”

As you consider your pilgrimage with God, reflect upon the times that God empowered you to rise above your circumstances.

When has God allowed you to exhibit great courage while facing insurmountable obstacles?

What promises of God do you cling to when traversing through life's peaks and valleys?



Psalm 116:1

*"I love the Lord, for he
heard my voice; he heard my
cry for mercy."*

*I*t is early morning, the room is still darkened by the blanket of night, but ribbons of light will soon appear through the curtains of the shaded room. He awakens slowly his stirrings becoming increasingly audible as he greets the new day. He begins his morning conversing with his fingers and toes. Inspecting his hands, he talks to them, tastes them and then talks some more. His parents, sleeping nearby, hear the unintelligible chatter of their first born and are stirred from slumber. They lay listening in rapt attention to the sweet voice.

Morning is the best time of the day. It is when the Little Man loves to talk. His parents, longing for much-needed rest, succumb to the urge to join the conversation. Resisting the temptation to snatch a few more minutes of rest, they make their way into the nursery. They are at once captivated by the murmurings of their infant and they are enthralled by the sound of his voice and attentive to the verbal nuances that give expression to his wants and needs.

It's easy to think about the heart of God during such an encounter. Just as the infant's parents interpret the

needs of their wordless child, so too does God interpret the needs of His children. During those times when we are wordless and unable to articulate our needs to God, He hears and understands us. Romans 8:26 reads, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

There will be times in life when we will be rendered powerless to pray as we should. We find ourselves so burdened and raw with pain that we are unable to purge our troubled hearts. It is at precisely those times that our Heavenly Father through His Spirit, assisted by his continual presence, speaks on our behalf, prays when we are subdued by desolate situations and impenetrable circumstances.

Just as the infant depends on his loving parents to mercifully meet his needs, so should we, as children of God, come to our Father with the expectation that He will also meet our needs.

It is at those times, when bereft and inconsolable, we are raised up so that God's power might be displayed in

us and that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. We are tempted to believe that we are abandoned, we are not heard and that we are alone in our travails.

But God, in His mercy, cannot forsake his own and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is His faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22, 23). So we are ever thankful that he meets our needs and hears our cries for mercy.

Father God, we thank you that during those times that life in this fallen world takes its inevitable toll on us, we have the blessed assurance that you hear our voice and hear our cries for mercy. We thank you for your Holy Spirit and His power to speak on our behalf. We praise you that His continual presence is your gift to us, the promised Comforter. We thank you that you hear our voice and respond in love and grace. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Psalm 116:1

“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.”

How often do you talk to God in prayer? Do you believe that God hears your prayers?

When was the last time you quieted yourself before God and allowed Him to speak to you?

It has been written that there are five levels of communication:

- 1) Clichés - a trite phrase or expression.
 - 2) Facts - information/statistics requiring no in-depth thinking or feeling.
 - 3) Opinions - includes concerns, expectations, and personal goals.
 - 4) Feelings - the sharing of deepest emotions.
 - 5) Needs - the deepest level of communication and intimacy where you feel completely safe to reveal your unique needs.
- What level best describes your communication with God and what steps would you need to take to improve this communication?



Photo by marie kelley photography

Psalm 136:2
*"Give thanks to the
 God of gods. His
 love endures forever."*

While traveling through Europe, love padlocks appear in various locations. The love padlocks shown above were observed in Rome, commonly an adornment to bridges. There are varied explanations for the origin of the love padlocks, but it is reported that love padlocks started appearing in Europe in the early 2000s. Typically the sweethearts' names or initials are inscribed on the padlock and its key is thrown away to symbolize unbreakable love.

Throughout history there have been many symbols used by lovers to illustrate their affection for one another. In years past, couples' names encircled with a heart were lovingly engraved on tree trunks. Weathering storms and standing the test of time, the tree's emblem served as an enduring image of love declared. In this 14th year of the 21st century, one of the most personal ways to express one's love for another takes the form of a tattoo.

Today's culture embraces tattoos that encourage the lover to demonstrate loyalty and unending devotion through the enduring ink marks made on one's body. As the tattoo itself forever marks the body it symbolizes the indelible mark the beloved has made on the lover's heart.

And so it is with God. His love for his children has been expressed in many ways and has taken many forms. The Bible is filled with examples of God's unconditional love for mankind. Beginning in Genesis 1, God's providential care for his creation is witnessed as he fashioned a perfect environment for man's survival. His symbols of love are displayed in the daily sunrise and sunset, the provision of food and nourishment in the form of plants, animals and

water. The earth is full of his unfailing love (Psalm 33:5).

God's love was profoundly displayed through Jesus Christ. John 3:16 reads: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The thought of exchanging one's beloved child as a ransom for another is inconceivable to the finite mind, but is God's ultimate and conclusive expression of who He is: Love.

The resurrection demonstrated His dominion over death and our liberation grants us freedom from the bondage of the fear of death. Finally, God provides another emblem of His love in the form of His Spirit. Romans 5:5 reads, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

God's Spirit is an ever-present confirmation of His love, reassuring us that we are the very children of God (1 John 3:2). God's Spirit is God's padlock of His everlasting love.

Dear God in heaven, I come to you in the name of Jesus. I acknowledge that I am a sinner, and I am sorry for my sins and want to be right with you. I ask you to forgive me of all my sins. I believe that your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, shed His precious blood on the cross at Calvary and died for my sins, and I am now willing to turn from my sin. The Bible tells me that if I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in my heart that God raised Him from the dead, I will be saved (Romans 10:9). This very moment I believe with my heart and I confess with my mouth and accept Jesus Christ as my own personal Savior. Thank you for saving me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

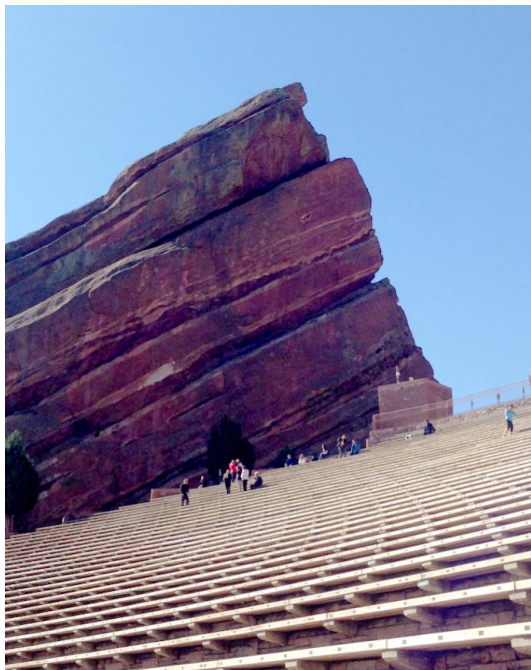
Psalm 136:2

“Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.”

Do you believe some sins are worse than others? Which of your personal sins do you permit to reign in your mortal body?

An unknown author penned the following quote: “Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.” Can you identify when a sinful action or attitude became uncontrollable in your life?

How did you or how will you gain victory over this area of your life? As you surrender to God, trust Him to work in and through you to gain the victory.



Revelation 4:10,11

“And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, ‘You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased.’”

Originally, the place was known as the “Garden of the Angels.” The Red Rocks Park and Amphitheater is a rock structure near Morrison, Colorado, 15 miles west of Denver where performances have been held for more than 100 years. It is reported that 9,450 people may be seated in the amphitheater and performers from every genre of music have graced the stage throughout its history.

Red Rocks is reported to be the only naturally-occurring acoustically perfect amphitheater in the world. It has been described as a deeply spiritual place. It is fitting then, that in Colorado’s “Garden of Angels” the first performance of each season is the Easter Sunrise Service. This non-denominational service begins early in the morning so that attendees may see the sun rise. Hundreds of doves are released into the Sunday morning sky as thousands gather to worship God in the midst of His magnificent creation. Easter sunrise services are a recognition that Jesus no longer lay in the tomb on Easter morning.

Red Rocks has been enjoyed by millions from all walks of life who

invariably describe the experience as awe-inspiring, breathtaking and extraordinary. Based on these descriptions, it is nearly unimaginable what the worship experience will be like in heaven.

Music has been a customary and established part of man’s experience as documented in the Bible beginning in Exodus and continuing through to the last book of Revelation. The Bible’s first record of music is found in Exodus 15 where Moses and the Israelites sing a song of praise to the Lord for their deliverance. In Revelation, the last book of the Bible reveals that seven angels held harps given to them by God and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb, extolling the great and marvelous deeds of the Lord God Almighty.

A beautiful exposition on worship is rendered by Jesus in Luke 19. The setting takes place on the Sunday, commonly called “Palm Sunday,” just before the crucifixion later that week. As the Lord and his joyful disciples traveled to Jerusalem, they began to praise God for all the miracles they had seen, “Blessed is the king who comes in

the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” “I tell you,” he replied, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Matthew Henry writes of this scripture, “This was, in effect, literally fulfilled, when, upon men’s reviling Christ upon the cross, instead of praising him, and his own disciples’ sinking into a profound silence, the earth did quake and the rocks rent. Pharisees would silence the praises of Christ, but they cannot gain their point.”

Holy Father, may we join with the Psalmists who proclaimed, My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord, and open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise (Psalm 51:15). As we reflect on the beauty of your creation and worship you, the Creator of heaven and earth, may our mouths pour forth love and adoration, for you are worthy. This we pray in Christ's Holy name. Amen.

Revelation 4:10, 11

“And they lay their crowns before the throne and say,
‘You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power.
For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased.’”

As you consider opportunities to praise God, when was the last time you spoke of His wondrous works?

What efforts do you make to pursue righteousness?

When did you last share the Good News of the Gospel with those who are perishing? Ask God to provide you with opportunities to share Him in all circumstances and in a variety of ways.

Then and Now

I was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1952. One sister, Cindy, was born in 1954. We grew up in a small town that had the distinction of housing three industrial companies: Goodyear, Firestone and Goodrich Tire and Rubber Companies. My parents managed a family-owned tavern whose clientele were comprised largely of individuals living in the neighborhood and factory workers stopping in for a quick beverage after a hard day's labor.

The Early Years

As the story was told repeatedly throughout my childhood, the family business had been started by my maternal grandfather, an immigrant from Macedonia (a country located in the central Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe). Upon arriving in the United States, grandfather settled in Youngstown, Ohio and opened a tavern there. He later relocated to Akron and began a new venture with the neighborhood tavern. Grandfather had a passion for gambling and permitted the illegal activity to be conducted on the premises. A select group of card players was provided a private room for their gaming endeavors and those who had the power to prohibit the activity either joined the group or turned a blind eye to the goings on.

Grandfather was introduced to my grandmother, also an immigrant from Macedonia and ten years his junior. The two were joined via an arranged marriage and that union produced my mother, their only child. After some years in Akron, my grandparent's saved enough of grandfather's winnings to purchase the piece of property on which their home and tavern were located. I never met my grandfather as he was born in 1892

and died of a sudden heart attack in 1946 at the age of 54, leaving a young widow.

After grandfather's death, grandmother withdrew my mother from high school and a marriage was arranged for her with a man whom she scarcely knew. As a result of grandfather's untimely passing, there was no one to run the family business; so mother and her new husband were charged with running the tavern and maintaining the family's income.

That ill-fated marriage ended within months. Freed from that unfortunate union, my mother met and then quickly eloped with my father. He was a local boy who swept mom off of her feet with his jet black hair, big brown eyes and love of big band music. Dad's family were immigrants from Bulgaria, (a country which occupies a portion of the eastern Balkan Peninsula). Their shared culture and mutual love of music and dance gave the newlyweds hope for a promising future. They returned from their honeymoon, took up residence with my maternal grandmother and dad took over management of the tavern while mom cared for the home.

This living arrangement may have been intended to be a short term plan, but it remained as long as I lived in my home. Tragedy struck soon after my parent's marriage, preventing mom and dad from ever owning a home of their own and always residing in the grandmother's residence. Mom was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer shortly after their marriage and within four years, dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and given only five years of survival. Mom underwent extensive surgery to eradicate the cancer and dad's health progressively diminished to the degree that he

quickly became disabled and incapable of managing the family business.

Social services in the 1950s and 1960s were not developed as they are today, so my parents quickly became dependent upon maternal grandmother for shelter, clothing and all manner of financial support.

My family was very religious and preserved their religious and cultural traditions. I grew up speaking two languages and my home was steeped in Eastern European song, dance, food and religious observances. The church served to provide religious instruction as well as cultural cohesiveness. Many church events enabled this ethnic group to interact with one another frequently throughout the month and thereby ensuring that their beloved customs were perpetuated and passed on to subsequent generations.

Our family observed Holy days, and we had our house blessed once per year by the priest and when difficulties arose, we had a makeshift altar in our home where we prayed to God in our time of need. We attended picnics, church dances and various activities that kept us in fellowship with our church family, but Bible study was not encouraged. This is not to say that it never happened, only that there is no recollection of it.

Leaving Home

At the age of seventeen, I was selected to work as a secretary at one of the rubber companies. As this opportunity provided me with a consistent salary, I exerted my independence and moved into my own apartment. My world view changed and I embarked on a lifestyle economically and socially different from the one in which I was raised. For the next 10 years my friends became the mainstay of my life and our

shared pursuit of happiness led us down many roads that did nothing to improve our morality or our spirituality.

The 1970s were a time of ambiguity. President Richard Nixon faced impeachment for the Watergate scandal; and Vietnam veteran's returned to a less than enthusiastic stateside welcome. The environmental concerns and the sexual liberation movement were simultaneously addressed in the frequently viewed bumper sticker — "save water, shower with your steady."

In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in favor of *Roe v. Wade* and that the U.S. Constitution contained the right to abortion. My first child, along with an estimated 43 million unborn babies, fell victim to this cultural holocaust. The decision to end my child's life within the first trimester, although sanctioned by the nation's legal system, could never be justified, excused or reconciled by my own conscience.

The unalterable offense positioned me for a self-imposed exile from God. The inability to forgive myself for this murderous act kept me from seeking God as I believed Him to be as despairing of me as I was. All my feelings of unworthiness before the abortion were exacerbated by this fate-filled act. I believed myself to be damaged beyond redemption with the feelings of shame and guilt worn as an ever-present shroud.

As a young adult, my childhood religion was reduced to appearing in church for weddings and funerals. God was not a driving force in my life, though I did acknowledge Him, but did not pursue Him. Saint Augustine wrote, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." These words accurately depict my spiritual state during my young adult life. Attempts were made to fill my emptiness with

people, places and things. Although there were fleeting pleasures of sin, true contentment eluded me.

When I was 27 years old I married my best friend of 10 years shortly after we realized our friendship had blossomed into a sweet love. Our first child, a son, was born within the first year of our marriage. Two years later our daughter was born. There was an expectation that with the love of a spouse and the unspeakable joy of motherhood would come the contentment that had escaped me for so long. Yet, despite the unspeakable joy that those relationships can bring, there remained within me a restless heart, I remained unsettled and left longing for something that I couldn't express or understand.

When the expectation of a peace-filled life did not come to fruition, unrest began to permeate my soul. I was finally living the life I believed would complete me and bring me the joy I longed for. Yet, there was no peace for my weary soul. It was Blaise Pascal, who wrote, "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus."

Born Again

It was on my 30th birthday that a dear relative invited me to join her for Sunday morning worship. She knew I was unhappy and she longed to share with me the missing piece of my life. It was in this non-denominational church that the Gospel was preached and I was presented with the opportunity to surrender my life to Jesus Christ and enter into a relationship with the Living God. I heard the message of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. I learned that He died and took my sins upon Himself and He saved me from eternal separation from God. He took my past, present and future sins, that I might be cleansed, forgiven and free to

walk in newness of life. Just as I was physically born into my family 30 years earlier, I was spiritually reborn into God's family as I accepted Jesus' death on Calvary's cross as punishment for my sins. It was at that point, at that time on my physical birthday, that I was spiritually reborn into a new life, a new heritage and a new inheritance. Life as I had known it ceased; I was now a new creation in Christ. ("Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Corinthians 5:17).

It was a dramatic conversion, nothing short of miraculous. Because Christ died I was forgiven. ("Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good" Psalm 25:7). There came an instant desire to read and understand God's Word. The Bible became my passion, a whole new world opened up to me as I longed to know the God who loved me and gave His life for me. I finally experienced the deep, unending contentment that I had been longing for. My life did not become trouble free, but my peace was secure as I trusted God with each moment and each day of my life. ("And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:7).

To my husband's credit, he never hindered me from pursuing my relationship with Jesus. He did, however, say it was a phase that would pass so he was content to let it run its course and believed that the "old" me would be back in short order.

After three years of watching my life change, seeing how peaceful and content I'd become and observing me live my faith in practical and consistent ways, my beloved husband called my pastor and said he wanted what I had. In the living room of our home, my husband prayed to receive Jesus Christ

as his Lord and Savior and thus began his journey of faith. ("In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" Matthew 5:16).

In the coming years, my husband was responsible for helping my father join the family of God. He prayed with Dad to receive Jesus Christ as his Savior. Dad outlived the doctor's prognosis that he would only live five years with Parkinson's disease. He lived 48 years with the disease and accepted Jesus in his late 70s. Dad's journey with the Lord was something sweet to behold. He lived in a nursing home for 10 years as the Parkinson's disease rendered him unable to care for himself.

One Wednesday evening, I made an unannounced visit to the nursing home to spend time with him. When I walked into the nursing home, I found

my father in the Chapel attending a church-sponsored midweek service. I stood in the doorway of the Chapel and watched my dad with his broken body twisted and slumped in the wheelchair, tears in his eyes, unaware of my presence, singing as audibly as he was able, "Nothing but the blood of Jesus." I stood riveted, humbled and awed at the power of Jesus to redeem and renew a surrendered heart. ("Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" 2 Corinthians 4:16).

My husband and I have had the privilege of watching our son and daughter embrace the Lord Jesus for themselves and marry spouses that are like-minded in their devotion to Christ. As we watch our children raise their children in the love and admonition of the Lord, we praise God that they are faithfully sharing their faith and

providing their children with the opportunity to know and love Jesus for themselves.

In the 32 years that I've been walking with Jesus Christ, I've seen many dark days and passed through some deep, turbulent waters. These trials tested and purified my faith. The devotions that I've penned are heart-felt and intended to encourage my beloved grandchildren and great-grandchildren to walk in God's truth and seek Him with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind and all their strength. These writings are a legacy to my loved ones that they, too, may one day proclaim, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Jesus said "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3).

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Father God, your word tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We acknowledge that Jesus Christ is your only provision for man's sin and that you demonstrated your own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

We are grateful that you have provided us the opportunity to receive Christ through personal invitation. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:1-8). As we receive Jesus by faith, as an act of the will, we rejoice that you take away our sin, dress us in fine garments and place a clean turban on our head.

We are humbled to be clothed in the spotless robe of Christ's righteousness. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:26). In Christ's Holy name. Amen.

—Joan Shaffer

